

# Snake safety

## Fact sheet

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Snakes are ectothermic. This means they maintain their body heat by absorbing heat from external sources. A snake's body temperature and activity levels are controlled by the surrounding air and ground temperature.

Snakes become inactive during winter when their metabolism slows down and they lie dormant, using almost no energy. In early spring, they emerge and bask in the sun to warm up. They also gain body heat by lying on warm surfaces (eg asphalt, concrete and rocks which absorb heat) or under warm surfaces (eg building materials, such as corrugated roofing iron).

Snakes are often inactive when it is very hot and will seek refuge to avoid overheating.

Spring is the time when snakes become more active and less wary as they go about feeding (to build up body reserves after winter) and breeding.

All snakes are an important part of the natural environment as they reduce populations of some of their prey species, such as rats and mice.

This publication contains some simple tips you can use to discourage snakes from your property. It also gives you some safety tips for avoiding, and dealing with, snakes.

## Reduce their food source

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Reduce the snakes' primary food source – rats and mice. Rats and mice like to live near humans because we provide food and shelter for them. They feed on food scraps, pet food, spilt seed and grain.

### **Wildlife feeding platforms, aviary bird seed and chook feed**

Feeding wildlife can turn a native animal into a pest. If you choose to feed wildlife, avoid bread or cake as rats and mice are particularly attracted to this type of food. They are not healthy for the wildlife anyway.

Make sure you store aviary bird seed and chook feed in sealed containers and clean up spilt food at the end of each day. Take extra precautions when cleaning out aviaries - they provide perfect snake habitats.

### **Pet food**

Stop leaving food out all of the time for your pet to eat. Free choice feeding is recognised as significantly contributing to pet obesity and it provides pest animals (rats and mice) with an easy 'meal ticket'.

### **Compost bins**

Here are some tips for keeping snakes away from your compost bin:

- turn compost heaps regularly to prevent rodents feeding and breeding in them
- don't put egg shells into the bin/heap (rodents love them)

- only put raw food scraps into a compost bin, not onto an open heap
- cover raw food scraps with other materials (eg grass clippings or a layer of soil)
- place the bin on a layer of fine mesh.

Consider the benefits of a compost tumbler or worm farm system to compost food scraps and help you avoid problems with rats and mice.

## Remove or reduce hiding areas

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### Rodents

Rats and mice make their homes in sheds, garages, boxes, ceilings, wood heaps and compost bins. Removing or reducing the amount of cover and hiding areas will limit their hiding spaces.

### Reptiles (snakes and lizards)

Did you know that snakes and lizards have similar habitat requirements? With less natural habitat for wildlife, some species of snakes and lizards will seek shelter under building materials, in wood heaps, rubbish piles and overgrown gardens in urban areas.

Young snakes feed on small lizards before they grow large enough to eat mice and rats. Lizards, like snakes, use garden clutter to shelter from predators and to find food. Reducing the clutter will reduce the shelter for both snakes and lizards.

The bluetongue lizard (which is harmless) is commonly found in gardens in urban and country areas. They use piles of timber, rockeries,

sheds and ground cover plants in the garden for shelter (and protection from cats, dogs, foxes and people).

### How to reduce cover and hiding areas

Keep grass low. This will increase your chance of seeing a snake from a safe distance.

Keep wood heaps away from the house. Store wood in a secure shed with a concrete floor. This is also important if you live in a bushfire area.

Snakes (and rodents) can find easy access to buildings through open doors or under poorly fitted doors. Cover the bottom of doors with a rubber seal or with weather stripping.

Keep a tidy shed. Use shelving to store items instead of having them on them on the shed floor. Clean up rubbish in the shed – like old paint cans, rags and drop sheets.

Manage building materials. Do not lay corrugated iron or colour bond fencing on the ground. Store vertically or on racks above the ground.

Reduce rubbish. Do you really need to keep it? Take advantage of council hard rubbish collection days or hire a skip.

Consider storing your boots off the ground. Always check before putting your boots on. Turn your boots upside down and give them a shake. Spiders, centipedes or scorpions may also hide in enclosed spaces. (Never put your hand where you cannot see.)

Reduce vegetation in an overgrown garden. Prune the lower branches of shrubs to increase

your chance of seeing a snake from a safe distance.

Use low-lying mat-like native ground cover plants for gardens near the house. Using mat-like ground covers instead of bushy groundcovers or low shrubs in your garden will increase your chance of seeing a snake from a safe distance.

## Water

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Wildlife, farm animals and pets do it tough during periods of hot and dry weather. As water can evaporate quickly on hot days many people provide additional water for animals. Some put water containers on the ground for animals such as possums, koalas and lizards.

It is important to keep in mind that snakes also rely on water on those hot days.

You should place water containers for wildlife away from the family home to reduce the chances of a close encounter with a snake.

If you have a fish pond, frog pond, swimming pool or water feature near your house, keep the grass low and maintain garden areas to increase your chance of seeing a snake from a safe distance.

## If you come across a snake on your property

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Never attempt to catch or kill a snake. They will defend themselves if confronted or threatened. Most snake bites occur when people try to catch or kill a snake.

Keep children away from the snake. If the snake is outside in your yard, send your children into the house.

Keep dogs and cats away from the snake. Deter inquisitive pets by hosing them with water. Lock them away if possible.

Contact a licensed snake catcher if you wish to have the snake removed from your property. It is important to keep an eye on the snake from a safe distance until the snake catcher arrives. This will increase the chances of the snake catcher locating and removing the snake from your property.

To find a snake catcher, look under *Snake* on [www.whitepages.com.au](http://www.whitepages.com.au)

**Note:** snake catchers charge a fee for this service. If the snake catcher attends the call out and is unable to locate and remove the snake, a fee may still be payable to cover fuel costs and time.

## If you come across a snake inside your house (or other building)

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If a snake finds its way inside your house or building:

- remain calm to avoid disturbing it (otherwise it may try to find a place to hide in your house to avoid a confrontation)
- never attempt to catch or kill the snake as most snake bites occur when people try to catch or kill a snake

- close the internal doors inside your house (where safe to do so). Block any gaps under internal doors (rolled up towels work well)
- open the external doors to give the snake a chance to vacate your house
- stay away from the snake.

Contact a licensed snake catcher to have the snake removed from your property. To find a snake catcher, look under *Snake* on [www.whitepages.com.au](http://www.whitepages.com.au)

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## Snake safety when gardening

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Always disturb the garden and mulch piles with a long stick before putting your hands in.

Wear thick leather gloves.

Wear long pants (preferably heavy weight pants like jeans) and covered footwear (leather boots or rubber boots).

Avoid putting your hands into places where snakes may shelter, such as:

- holes in logs and trees
- holes made by other animals
- cracks in the ground
- holes in tree roots
- under rocks.

## Snake safety when bushwalking

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Stick to well-used, open trails. In scrubby areas, use a walking stick to alert a snake of your approach.

Avoid walking through thickly vegetated areas, especially during spring.

Step onto, rather than over fallen logs as there may be a snake on the other side.

Do not step or put your hands where you cannot see.

Wear over-the-ankle boots and loose-fitting long pants.

Wear clothing which provides a contrast to the environment (normally darker clothes) so that snakes will be more likely to see you coming.

Snakes can hear low frequency sounds like the thud of approaching footsteps and movement of a large object and will either move away or hide to avoid detection. Do not disturb a snake on a walking trail. Give the snake a wide berth.

## Snakes and the law

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In South Australia, all snakes are protected under the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972 (NPW Act). Where a snake has attacked or is attacking any person it is lawful to humanely kill the offending snake without any permit or authority under the NPW Act.

